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# Reno lifeguard saves 16 from gas contamination

**Alex Newman (ANEWMAN@RGJ.COM)** RENO GAZETTE-JOURNAL May 9, 2006

A botched delivery by a chemical company with a history of mishaps hospitalized 13 North Valley High School swimmers and three city employees Monday afternoon at the Northeast Community Center, officials said.

Muriatic acid left in a tube from an earlier delivery mixed with sodium hypochlorite, which sanitizes swimming pools, and created toxic chlorine gas during a delivery just before 3 p.m. by Sierra Chemical Co., Reno fire spokesman Steve Frady said.

Steve Schwade, head lifeguard at the city pool, said he noticed the strong chlorine smell in the pool area and questioned the delivery driver, who was refilling tanks outside the building.

After realizing the chemicals had been mixed, Schwade then led the evacuation of the 13 high school swimmers. Schwade said the students were able to follow directions and he didn't have to help anyone out of the building at 1301 Valley Road.

"We were pretty fortunate they were high-school age swimmers," Schwade said. "Young people are often more susceptible to any chemicals in the air."

Using a respirator mask, Schwade made a second trip inside the building to fetch the swimmers' towels and bags.

"There was one situation where one of the girls suffered from asthma and she didn't have an inhaler," said Schwade, 22, a University of Nevada, Reno student. "That was the only one I saw real bad."

About 50 people were evacuated from other areas of the northeast center.

Representatives from Sierra Chemical Co. refused requests for an interview immediately after the incident.



A woman comforts a member of the North Valleys High swim team after about 13 team members were overcome by gas Monday afternoon at the Northeast Community pool, 1301 Valley Rd. A lifeguard at the pool led the swimmers to safety. (TIM DUNN / RENO GAZETTE-JOURNAL)

## Company history

In January 1998, a blast at the Sierra Chemical Co. plant east of Sparks near Mustang killed four workers and injured three. The plant produced primers, devices used to ignite larger charges of dynamite, and employed mostly Hispanic workers.

Sierra Chemical owner Stanley Kinder was fined \$997,000 by state officials for 38 safety, training and procedure violations. After appeals and negotiations, the fine was trimmed to \$228,000. Kinder disputed a federal investigation that determined the blasts were caused by a worker's error, caused in part by inadequate safety practices and training.

The Nevada Division of Environmental Protection imposed a \$20,000 fine on the company at 2302 Larkin Circle in Sparks for violations found after a July 2001 chlorine leak sent four workers to the hospital.

The company was cited in October 2001 by the state environmental agency for failing to follow safety procedures outlined in its manual that could have prevented the leak, said David Emme chief of the state agency's bureau of waste management.

Sierra Chemical, which manufactures high-strength bleach for water systems and swimming pools, agreed to pay \$10,000 of the fine and make \$12,500 in safety improvements to offset the remainder of the penalty.

Most recently, Sierra Chemical was fined \$28,800 in 2005 by the Pacific Southwest Pesticides Office of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency for selling a mislabeled product, according to the agency's Web site.

## Decontamination

The students sat about 30 minutes on a lawn on the northwest side of the community center, some wrapped in towels and coughing, while paramedics administered oxygen. They sipped water bottles the swim coach had pulled out of her car, said Joe Wilson, recreation supervisor with the city of Reno parks and recreation department.

Seventeen people were decontaminated with a series of showers inside the Regional Hazardous Materials Response Team van, and firefighters worked to ventilate the building with fans and open windows and doors, Frady said.

Parents, notified by the swim coaches of the accident, stood by their children on the lawn.

"It was a little scary, but the swim coach called me right away," said Janie Balfour as she watched her daughter, Jordan Balfour, enter a van bound for a hospital. Jordan Balfour is a North Valleys sophomore in her second year on the swim team.

"She appears to be OK, " Janie Balfour said. "I talked to her before she got in the van."

Officials at Washoe Medical Center, where six females and five males were taken, said Monday evening all but three were released after treatment and expected the others to go home Monday night. Six others were taken to St. Mary's Medical Center.

Steve Matles, safety officer at Washoe Med, said most of the patients had respiratory problems, were evaluated and some went through decontamination baths.

"A lot of it depends on how strong was the stuff, how deep was the exposure," Matles said. "One of the things you do have to watch is sometimes there might be a delayed reaction (to the gas)."

Wilson credited Schwade for noticing the smell quickly.

"Even the lifeguard on the stand wasn't smelling it," Wilson said. "Steve must have just got a tiny whiff of it and decided to see what was going on. The exposure could definitely have been worse had he not jumped right on top of it."

The Northeast Community Center reopened about 4:45 p.m. Monday, The pool is slated to reopen at 10 a.m. today following an 8:30 a.m. inspection by health officials, Wilson said.

A chlorine gas accident hospitalized 43 children swimming at Traner Pool in 1994 when chlorine gas built up when the main water pump was shut off. Officials installed safety switches the following summer in all Washoe County pools to prevent a similar accident.

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